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Can This Algorithm Find Hires of a Certain Race?

By Lauren Weber Follow

Updated April 30, 2014 11:45 am ET

It's hardly news that many tech companies lack diversity in their ranks. Witness the high-profile lawsuits and web commentary alleging raging sexism, racism, harassment and an all-around bro culture at Silicon Valley firms.

Might the solution lie in an algorithm?

Entelo Inc., maker of a recruiting platform that focuses on technology roles, on Wednesday began offering a paid search tool that helps recruiters identify job candidates who are women, of particular races or ethnicities, or who served in the military.

Entelo will charge existing customers—currently about 125 companies, including Facebook Inc. and Yelp Inc., that hire a lot of engineers and developers—$10,000 or more per year to conduct targeted searches for candidates from traditionally underrepresented groups. For example, a recruiter could search for JavaScript engineers in the Bay Area who are Hispanic, or female Python developers in Nashville.

While tools that help companies find specialized talent are nothing unusual, the technology powering the new product, called Entelo Diversity, make strike some as unsettling.

The company created an algorithm that reviews individuals' online profiles—pulling in data from Twitter, Github and other social and tech sites—to create a list of potential job candidates. Using data about a person's alma mater, professional and social affiliations, and job titles, the algorithm determines his or her likely gender, ethnicity or race, and whether they have military experience. A graduate of Howard University, a historically black college, would likely be noted as black, for instance, while an engineer with the word 'sergeant' in an earlier job title might be labeled a veteran.

The San Francisco-based Entelo has been beta-testing the feature with six customers for the last couple of months and so far says it is about 95% accurate, meaning that a test search for female engineers might pull up 100 results, and 95 will in fact be women.

Entelo Chief Executive Jon Bischke said he's aware that the product will raise eyebrows among legal and HR teams who are concerned that a feature calling out candidates' race, gender or military status may cross legal lines or represents reverse discrimination.

"It started with companies telling us, 'we want to bring more women on to our engineering teams,'" Bischke said.

Such targeted recruiting is bound to discomfit some, especially given last week's Supreme Court decision upholding Michigan's decision to end affirmative action programs at its public universities. Candidates may feel that recruiters are giving preference to applicants from underrepresented groups, while others may worry that they're under consideration because of their background and not their talents.

But Bischke says Entelo is simply automating a process recruiters already use when they network with professional or campus associations to source female, minority or veteran technologists. In addition, recruiters may already be doing this type of selection by looking at online data, such as individuals' names, LinkedIn photos or social-media profiles, to guess their race or gender.

Bischke says recruiters should use Entelo Diversity to assemble a diverse applicant pool for jobs, and not to make final hiring decisions. "This is about saying 'we want to get 100 good resumes for a role and we'd like 20 of them to be from women.'"

The software does not allow recruiters to use it to practice discrimination against racial minorities, women, and other protected groups. A recruiter could not search for white HTML engineers in Chicago, for example, because "based on our assessment of employment law, that's not an allowed search," said Bischke.

The company does not share its formula with potential clients, so employers can't ensure the data collected by the algorithm conform to a company's own legal and recruiting standards. Bischke said customers will have to run tests and do their own due diligence to be sure the product meets their needs.

As for reverse discrimination, "I'm sensitive to that," said Bischke. "But there's active discrimination going on today and we hope this will mitigate that."